Addressing Nonprofits' Historical Harm to Minority Groups through Radical Transparency: Urban Displacement and the Making of a University

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ABSTRACT

How can today's nonprofits address their past harmful actions to minorities and other vulnerable groups? This paper will present and analyze one method nonprofits can use to address this history: radical transparency. This paper will present a historical transparency project at IUPUI to address our racist history, placing it within existing public history work around radical transparency as a method of social repair, comparing to current trends in financial and governance transparency in nonprofits, and ultimately showing a broader concept of public transparency within the nonprofit sector as a valuable tool for social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Public trust is the common currency in all nonprofit work. And while the much-touted "Crisis of Trust" in the nonprofit industry has been recently called into question (Chapman et al., 2020), trust is still earned and not given, and each nonprofit need to build and maintain public trust in their particular work and organization.

Nonprofits have an established method of building trust in their current work through transparency in finances, governance, and the ultimate success of their programs, but many nonprofits have yet to fully reckon with their history. A nonprofit's history is an aspect of its public reputation that its leaders have no control over. A nonprofit cannot alter their past, so the only question is how to address it today. Nonprofits have an obligation to show to the public, including both donors and recipients, that their current work is morally just, while effectively addressing historic structural racism within their organizations.

This paper will present a current project we are undertaking at the IUPUI Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, which will make transparent our organization's racist history by digitizing and openly publishing historical documents about our destruction of the historic Black neighborhoods of Indianapolis. The paper will also explore current approaches to transparency in two fields, the nonprofit field at large, and my own subfield of the "memory" profession (libraries, archives, and museums). While the academic literature of both fields addresses transparency, it does so toward separate goals. I argue that the transparency goals in the memory field can apply in the broader nonprofit world to advance an organization's current mission and public reputation.

THE BIRTH OF IUPUI AND THE DEATH OF INDIANA AVENUE

The history of Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is quite complicated for an organization that's just 50 years old, with a partnership between two extant state universities, and folding in multiple Indianapolis-area schools that predate IUPUI's creation. It even holds the dubious distinction of once being a Jeopardy answer to "U.S. University with the longest name" (Conklin, 2003). The history of the very space where IUPUI sits is also more complicated than other universities. While many Midwestern universities were built on former farmland and other low-population-density spaces, the IUPUI campus was carved into the heart of a major city. Like other urban universities, the space the campus took, with the aid of the government, was predominantly owned by African Americans (Mullins & Jones, 2011, p. 250).

The near westside of Indianapolis, where IUPUI now sits, was settled by formerly enslaved African-Americans starting after the Civil War, and expanding during the Great Migration of the early 20th century (Mullins & Stanton-White, 2010, p. 11). Indiana Avenue was the neighborhood's social focal point, with the Madame Walker Building as its most famous landmark. The street was also home to businesses, churches, the offices of Black doctors and lawyers, and jazz clubs (Mullins & Stanton-White, 2010, p. 250). Another historically important landmark in this neighborhood was Lockefield Gardens, a New Deal-era public housing project that was considered a national model for effective architecture and planning (Giorgio, 2020) While the Walker Building still stands, all but 7 of the original Lockefield buildings were razed in 1983 (Mullins & Stanton-White, 2010, p. 48).

IU began acquiring land for a campus expansion in the 1950s, with a purchase of 37 acres in 1956 that the city had deemed "blighted," which was then razed and sold to the University at cost (Mullins & Jones, 2011, p. 254). By the late 1960s the University was purchasing 10 to 20 properties per month (Mullins & Jones, 2011, p. 254). Officially the University made limited use of eminent domain, but the specter of its power and the residents' inability to finance legal disputes was often enough to compel homeowners to sell to the University. To quote a former resident Luther Kurtz: "The only thing I know is you had no choice. They called it eminent domain. Well, I was ready to sell anyway" (Mullins & Stanton-White, 2010, p. 124). Eminent domain is now recognized as a tool of white supremacy (Somin et al., 2014).

The former residents of this neighborhood dispersed throughout Indianapolis, and were never able to recover the strong sense of place, history, and community that Indiana Avenue provided. Historic churches lost their attending members as the church body moved away, culminating in the sale of Bethel AME Church, the oldest African-American church in Indianapolis and Underground Railroad stop, for commercial use (Slone, 2016). The University's framing of their actions as "slum clearing," as well as buying homes at less than the replacement value for a comparable house elsewhere in the city, has left long-lasting resentment against IUPUI among the Black community of Indianapolis.

THE IUPUI NEIGHBORHOODS PROJECT

The historic documents of IUPUI's decades of land expansion are composed of meeting minutes, internal memos, land and building surveys, neighborhood photographs, legal correspondence, photographs of properties, and oral histories. A critical part of the historic record is also in the family records of former residents. At the Archives we frequently have requests for this material from students and scholars, but struggle to provide effective access due to the scattered nature of the records, and the need to visit our reading room in person to use most of them. This project had tangible goal: to scan all the material on this topic and make it available online for free. This would promote use of the collection by reducing the time and labor to use it, including our own staff labor in providing physical access. It had other goals as well: the first, to encourage IUPUI instructors to use this material in classroom assignments, as an online format is easier to use in undergraduate classes, requiring less knowledge of the nuances of archival research. Our second intangible goal was to provide complete transparency on the University's internal correspondence about their actions, with documents where university administrators and legal counsel discuss their strategies, their reasoning, and occasionally their own troubled reckoning with their actions.

The initial work of this project was funded with an IU Foundation Bicentennial Grant, an internal grant opportunity for projects related to the 200th anniversary of Indiana University. The grant was originally funded to digitize all relevant material related to the topic, and pay for speaker honoraria and hosting fees for community events, as well as scan-a-thons for former residents to digitize any family records about the neighborhoods. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 all programming funding from the grant was clawed back by the IU Foundation. This left us with just the digitization and presentation of historical material online, and no hope of in-person community engagement until after the pandemic subsides.

The creation of the online collection has also been slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and as of the time of this presentation, only a few digitized documents are available online. Nevertheless, we are pleased with what we have ready to present to the community, and have already informally shared this material with the descendants of displaced residents and interested scholars. We know from these early sharing efforts that those who have been harmed by IUPUI's historical actions value access to this raw documentation of discrimination against their families and communities, and we know that sharing them without our mediation will have broader effects over time.

The collection is currently available to view at:
https://ulib.iupuidigital.org/digital/collection/UDMU/search

THE VALUE OF TRANSPARENCY IN NONPROFIT WORK

Transparency in nonprofits is already well-studied and practiced at some level by many organizations. Some transparency is mandated by the federal government, namely the required disclosures of the 990 tax filing, and the history of legally required nonprofit transparency is already well covered in the literature of nonprofit history (Simon, 1995). Some nonprofit transparency is simply customary, such as publishing annual reports.

However, as reported in "Secrecy and Transparency in Nonprofit Organizations: If a Nonprofit Prefers Secrecy, What Does It Want to Hide?" transparency is still viewed skeptically and even fearfully by nonprofit leaders (Friedman & Wolcott, 2018, p. 5). One common sticking point we've found at the Archives when working with nonprofits donating their records is the matter of meeting minutes for boards of directors and committees, which some organizations have refused to let us make public, or want to make public only after years of delay. This particular fear of exposure of their meeting minutes, and subsequent interest from donors and the public to see them, is also reported by Friedman and Wolcott (2018, p. 6).

Despite resistance and fear from individual nonprofit leaders, transparency is established as a broad shared value in the nonprofit industry at large. Both Charity Navigator and GuideStar provide “transparency” ratings for the organizations they profile (Charity Navigator, 2020) (Candid, 2020). Charity Navigator generates their ratings themselves, but GuideStar’s rating is entirely voluntary for the organization to apply for. A fair amount of organizations also provide a high level of “upward” transparency, providing a great deal of financial and program transparency to the larger foundations who fund them (Friedman & Wolcott, 2018, p. 12) Peter Brinkerhoff argues that a nonprofit must be transparent because it does not “belong” to itself, or even to the board of directors: it belongs to its stakeholders, as it uses exclusively the resources of others (as quoted by Friedman and Wolcott) (Brinckerhoff, 2004, p. 26; Friedman & Wolcott, 2018, p. 29).

Transparency is often invoked as a tool of trust repair during a crisis, but this has mixed results. Age of an organization is a strong predictor for an organization’s ability to withstand major fraud (Archambeault & Webber, 2018, p. 43). I posit that this is because an older organization has had more time to develop “reputation capital,” public goodwill in their tenure and body of work that can be “spent” during a crisis event (Auger, 2011, p. 65). Conversely, voluntary disclosure after a crisis event was shown in a study to have no repairing effect on public perception and no effect on gaining future donations (Willems & Faulk, 2019, p. 8). This suggests that building public trust through transparency is something that must be proactive, not reactive, and embedded both into a nonprofit’s core values and its routine work, if it is to be successfully drawn on in a crisis situation.

THE VALUE OF TRANSPARENCY IN THE MEMORY PROFESSION

There is an old misconception that a historian’s goal is to tell history with “neutrality.” While the academic field of history has largely moved away from the idea that we can tell history from any neutral point of view since the post-modern movement of the midcentury (Iggers, 2012), lay people still often think of their history as having a single truth, a neutral, factual view of events. Public history, such as museums and popular historical writing, has been working to help the public understand and move toward the idea of subjective history.

There are multiple post-modern approaches to archives, the two most related to this project are from the archival science tradition and not the historiographical tradition. The first is the participatory archival model. This model has three key tools: one, decentralized curation, which is involving lay users in the collection and curation of archival material, two, radical user orientation, which is moving archivists’ first professional goal from preservation to usability, and three, public contextualization of archival material and archival processes, which is how records are made, who they are made for, how they came to the archives, and how archivists decided to keep them (Huvila, 2008, p. 17).

The second is the post-custodial archives (and museums) model, which is part of the post-colonial archival movement. The traditional custodial archival model hold that archives and archivists have a duty of care and responsibility to historic records’ continuance into the future, and this duty is guaranteed through legal and physical custody of records (Bastian, 2020, p. 5) However, custody of records is overwhelmingly in the hands of government or other institutional power, usually white. The legal custody of records in organizations of power reinforce colonialist principles of who has access to the records of marginalized groups (Bastian, 2020, p. 10). A practical application of this theory is the use of non-custodial digital surrogacy, which entails a traditional archives digitizing historic documents for the public’s use, but returning the physical copies or artifacts to their community owners (Bastian, 2020, p. 11).

While the IUPUI Neighborhoods Project does not use a pure approach from either of these models, it does combine elements of both. From the participatory archives model, while digitization can be a method of preservation with archival material, our only goal with this project was user access, any preservation value is a side-effect. Our place within the post-custodial/post-colonial model is less clear. Our collection is not post-custodial, as the records we are digitizing were created by the University for its own use, and have always been University property and under its control. However, these records contain evidence of harm, and their new broad and unmediated access is working against the colonialist control of who can access to records about themselves. Use of this material is no longer limited to people with the knowledge to navigate an archival finding aid, and the means to visit our reading room for several hours during the work day.

It can be hard to balance a need to be faithful to modern historical method and creating material and programming that the public will accept. However, there is evidence that people viewing a museum exhibit with a clear social position and call for action do not lose trust in the museum as a result of the organization taking a social stance (Wood, 2018, p. 37). Going too far in the pursuit of "neutrality" can also damage an organization's reputation, such as in January 2020, when the National Archives censored a photograph with a protest sign critical of Trump in an exhibit, a choice heavily criticized both by fellow archivists and the general public (Tucker & Rutland, 2020).

At the heart of our approach is documentary transparency, and respect for the individual to make their own historical meaning out of the records. Our online publishing of these documents has no interpretative historical "framing" of the actions described, no attempt to wrap the documents in any defense of them being "products of their time" or with "good intentions." Each reader of the records will come to them with their own personal knowledge of the events, of historic racism in Indianapolis and beyond, of IUPUI's place in modern Indianapolis, and we hope readers will interpret them without our influence into their meaning.

WHAT MAKES TRANSPARENCY "RADICAL?"

The term "radical transparency" originated in the technology community with the rise of the massively-networked era of the late 90s and early 00s, and described a future with a vast open-knowledge ecosystem that would drive social and economic growth (Heemsbergen, 2016, p. 140) Radical transparency is also an active concept in the business world, most notably with clothing company Everlane, who filed a trademark for the term (Testa et al., 2020). The definition I use is in-line with other emerging "radical" social concepts (such as radical compassion), which is that transparency becomes "radical" when it moves beyond the realm of what is necessary or even customary in the industry, or our society.

For an instructive museum example, Janet Marstine (2011) gives two theoretical narrative wall texts about an object in a museum. The "transparent" wall text would state that the object in question has unknown provenance, that is to say, the museum doesn't know how it got in their collection. A "radically transparent" wall text would add information that a museum owning and displaying objects with unknown provenance is an unsolved ethical problem in the field (p. 14). The first one is merely customary, museums almost always give provenance information for objects when displaying them, but the second text invites the public into a controversy in the field, and to judge if the museum is doing something wrong by displaying this artifact.

However, a downside of transparency is that it can make us feel that it is inherently superior to other forms of disclosure, such as a traditional narrative explanation (Birchall, 2014, p. 6), in short it can let us convince ourselves that making our records open and transparent excuses us from other work communicating about our organization with the public. Transparency, when radical, reorients us to the need for our disclosure, which is not just to give information to prove we're compliant with laws or responsible stewards of money, but to give the public enough material to judge us.

APPLYING RADICAL TRANSPARENCY TO NONPROFIT HISTORY

Nonprofits are a product of their time created by people, and are therefore subject to the same social movements in their society, for better or for evil. A salient example of a social movement heavily tied to nonprofit work of the past is eugenics. Eugenics is, and was, a philosophy that the human species can be perfected by selective breeding, and was tied to the Progressive Movement in America (Leonard, 2005, p. 207). Eugenics was a tool used to strip the reproductive and human rights of the disabled, as well as many non-white and non-Christian people (Leonard, 2005, pp. 212–214), and is for obvious reasons repugnant to most Americans today.

Planned Parenthood is a major modern nonprofit struggling with their historical ties to the eugenics movement. They have recently removed the name of their founder, Margaret Sanger, from their buildings in New York City (Stewart, 2020), however just 4 years ago they provided detailed fact sheets refuting claims that she was part of the eugenics movement (Planned Parenthood Federation for America, 2016). This follows a current trend in nonprofits, particularly in higher education, of stripping the names of problematic figures from buildings. Indiana University is also active in this trend, removing the name of a eugenicist this year (Carney, 2020), and a segregationist in 2018 (Lewandowski, 2018). However, this rapid shift in attitudes towards organizations addressing their problematic history is often limited to dealing with history at the level of institutional symbolism, such as buildings, and not addressing a history of racism at the structural level.

While harmful actions in a nonprofit's history is not obviously a "crisis situation" like fraud, embezzlement, or sexual abuse, it can rapidly become one. History can be weaponized against a nonprofit, such as with the Red Cross's intense media criticism in the past 5 years. One of the many points of criticism gathered against the American Red Cross was its historic racism: in particular field workers' actions during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and stark racial disparities in dispensing aid to Black and white victims (McMurchy, 2015). Yet in 2011 they proudly recounted their actions in this historic natural disaster in a press release to drum up donations for their current flood relief efforts (American Red Cross, 2011). This is an example of how an organization should have been more open and circumspect about their racist history before it became part of a crisis-level attack on their organization.

It is easy to find examples of nonprofit organizations who have handled their history poorly, simply because the idea of openly disclosing and even displaying your past sins without any urgent reason seems strange. It appears on the surface that it will damage your organization. However, if we combine the nonprofit world's acceptance of transparency as an industry value, with the experience of the memory profession in working with difficult history, we can create a compelling model for radical historical transparency that organizations can use to prevent a public perception crisis.

CONCLUSION

Radical transparency in history for a nonprofit is more than the old saying that "sunshine is the best disinfectant." That form of transparency is passive, and often an involuntary government compulsion. Radical transparency makes you uncomfortable and even afraid, because it is transparency that opens your nonprofit to vulnerability and criticism. We are all grappling in our organizations today with our responsibility and complicity in structural racism, and structural racism has so many roots and branches past and present that it can be hard to know where to start dismantling it. Critically facing our own discriminatory history is a crucial step in that, and radical historical transparency invites the public to help you grow, even if it hurts.

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